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ABSTRACT

Issues related to the Education Reform Bill of Ohio are discussed. Administration of norm-referenced achievement tests in reading, mathematics, language, and related school-ability tests is required for grades 4, 6, and 8 (effective by 1990) and grade 10 (effective by 1991). The reform bill specifies rewards and sanctions in addition to statewide publication of test scores and other district outcome measures as a way of encouraging the community to apply its own rewards and sanctions. Students graduating after July 1, 1993 will have to pass high school proficiency tests in reading, writing, citizenship, and mathematics. In early administrations of these tests, it was apparent that the wealth of the school district was linked with higher test scores. The test scores are being used to provide accountability, an important aspect of the educational reform effort. An Educational Management Information System is being developed for each district. The impact of testing requirements and the emphasis on accountability in Ohio are evidenced in the following areas: (1) curriculum alignment; (2) state versus local control; (3) teaching; and (4) effects on at-risk students. The reform bill is directly related to student test outcomes. The use of tests to measure effectiveness of the reform has strong support, but care must be taken to overcome the limitations of reliance on test scores alone. A 17-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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Cleveland City School District

ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUES IN OHIO'S EDUCATION REFORM BILL

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- The development of a sophisticated data-based educational Management Information System focusing on test scores to identify educationally 'deficient' and 'excellent' districts or schools.

A. Educational Initiatives

State Achievement/Ability Testing

The Achievement/Ability testing requires administration of a norm-referenced achievement tests in reading, mathematics and language and related school-ability tests at grades 4, 6, 8 (effective 1989-90) and 10 (effective 1990-91). These tests are based on State Board listing of approved tests as well as the forms (editions) and norms (no more that 10 years old) appropriate for each grade. The State directs the districts to administer tests during the empirical norming period for that test or will obtain interpolated norms, adjusted to the week or quarter month of testing.

The first administration occurred in the 1989-90 school year. Each district reported the average test scores of these students in reading, language arts, and mathematics. Each district also reported the number of students in these grades scoring at or above the 75th, 50th, and 25th percentiles and the number of these students who achieved as well as, higher than, and lower than their ability. The State Department of Education complied the statewide test results in a 1,400 page report. This report contained state aggregate, district and school building achievement test results and achievement as predicted by ability for the three grade levels and three subject areas. Although all school districts used the same NCE score scale and the same national benchmarks, several State Board of Education-approved tests with their respective normative data, were used.

The first statewide results were released in the Fall of 1990. As predicted, the release of this data led to Cleveland's Plain Dealer headline on September 29, 1990 that "CLEVELAND WAS THE LOWEST SCORING URBAN DISTRICT." The State results grouped Ohio's districts according to selected demographics variables, and Cleveland was placed in Group V with 16 other urban districts, characterized as having low family income and very high percent receiving aid to dependent children, with culturally diverse population, above average commercial tax base per pupil and high tax effort.

The most obvious fact in the distribution of scores is that the best scores were earned by students in affluent suburban districts in which few disadvantaged students were enrolled. This was followed by suburban schools with above average family income, then rural districts with below average family income. Large-city Ohio districts including Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Toledo, Dayton and Akron registered the lowest scores.

That wealth became a significant correlate to the State reported test scores and was confirmed in a study by Denmeyer and White (1990). In the first analyses wealth was operationally defined as the average income per tax return. Districts were divided into five income groups: Group 1 was composed of districts having an average income of 20,000 dollars or less; Group 2 consisted of districts having an average income of 21,00 to 25,000 dollars; Group 3 consisted of districts whose residents had average incomes between 26,000 and 30,000; Group 4 districts had average incomes between 31,000 and 35,000, and Group 5 districts incomes at or above 36,000 dollars. In the second analyses, wealth was operationally defined as the percent of a district's student population whose families were received aid to dependent children (ADC). Districts were divided into three ADC groups: Group 1 was composed of districts having 10 percent or less of their families receiving ADC;

Group 2 consisted of districts having 11 to 20 percent of their families receiving ADC, and Districts with 21 percent or more of their families receiving ADC composed Group 3. The findings indicated significant values for both analyses that look at wealth and percent of families on ADC on achievement scores. Districts with higher incomes reported higher NCE scores. Districts with lower percents of families on ADC reported lower NCE scores.

State Proficiency Testing

Students graduating after July 1, 1993 will have to pass high school proficiency tests in reading, writing, citizenship and mathematics. This makes Ohio about the 23rd or 24th state with exit tests for graduation, but the only one with a four-tiered diploma. The tests to be administered at the ninth and twelfth grade levels, is related to a four-tiered diploma as noted below:

- A Diploma of Basic Competency will be awarded to Ohio students who complete the curriculum requirements of the district and passes the ninth grade proficiency test.
- A Diploma with Distinction will be awarded to students who meet the criteria set by the school district.
- A Diploma with Commendation will be awarded to students who have met the additional criteria set by the State.
- A Certificate of Attendance will be awarded to Ohio students who do not pass the ninth grade test, but who has met the school district's graduation requirements.

Cleveland woke up one cold day in January 29, 1991 to headlines of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, "Only 10% of Cleveland's ninth graders passed the Statewide Proficiency Tests." The Plain Dealer also reported results for all school districts in Cuyahoga and surrounding counties, and since Americans love to compare numbers and come up with winners and losers, the situation around Cleveland that week was similar to that which one finds on Monday mornings following a Browns' game: glowing feelings in school districts where

students had high scores, disappointment in districts that did not perform as well as their neighbors. And just as sports fans react to their teams' fortunes, there were cries of "We're #1," We did better than our neighboring schools," and "What's wrong with our system?", depending on how one's school district was ranked on the test.

Pass rate scores of 33 school districts in the Cuyahoga County correlated .74 with their percent of ADC families. Cleveland Schools, very concerned about the lack of parity in the reading scores of Black and White students since the promulgation of the 1978 Remedial Order, was not only reflecting what was happening in Ohio, but was far better than all of Ohio. The results showed that while Cleveland Black students scored lower than White students, the difference was smaller, compared to the Black-White scores of the Ohio aggregated data (Table 1).

TABLE 1

PASS RATE FOR CLEVELAND AND OHIO NINTH GRADE PROFICIENCY TESTS

	Ohio			Cleveland		
Test	Total	Black	White	Total	Black	White
All Four Tests	33%	11%	37%	10%	9%	14%
Reading	78%	52%	89%	60%	59%	62%
Writing	76%	65%	79%	58%	57%	64%
Mathematics	43%	16%	48%	15%	13%	23%
Citizenship	55%	31%	60%	30%	27%	38%

The Ohio Achievement/Ability Test and Ninth Grade Proficiency Test results continues to confirm research which shows that wealth impact test scores. There are indeed some arguments about why this trend exists, but researchers agree that this association does not necessarily imply that school

districts with more affluent families are doing a better job than school districts serving average or poor families. And although the rankings of districts were hailed as a measure of educational quality to a large degree in Ohio, they appear to be no more than a measure of wealth. Districts whose residents had higher average income reported higher NCE scores and higher pass rate than districts whose residents had lower average incomes. Districts with a lower percent of ADC families reported higher ADC families.

Statewide testing and the subsequent rankings of districts are powerful enough to strike a responsive chord in politicians and the public. In the 1989 Gallop Poll on Education, 70% of American adults surveyed thought there should be a national testing program to measure the achievement of students. Clearly, test scores are seen as symbols of order, objectivity and important educational outcomes. They are thought to be scientific because they are numeric.

Development of Education Management Information System.

Accountability is one important component of Ohio's educational reform bill. Districts are expected to demonstrate to their residents that their tax dollars are being spent wisely and their children well trained. The key to accountability is to collect information and present it in some way.

About 200 variables have been identified for inclusion in the Educational Management Information System. Test scores based on the State-Achievement/Ability and the Ninth Grade Proficiency Tests appear to be among the major criteria for identification of "excellent" and "deficient" schools.

The Ohio Reform Bill has adopted a draft for standards against which schools or districts may be judged to be educationally excellent or deficient. Three levels of criteria are being proposed with standards becoming increasingly stringent. Chart I details the proposed Level I Standard, scheduled for implementation in the 1992-1993 school year.

The reform bill specifies rewards and sanctions in addition to statewide publication of test scores, and other district outcome measures as a way of encouraging the community to apply its own rewards and sanctions. Proposed sanctions include possible replacement of local officials, possible termination of teachers' contracts or principals' or the Superintendent's if corrective actions had not been implemented, or were not effective enough to remedy the problem. As an incentive, "excellent" school district's may be eligible for "waivers" from regulations as a strategy to provide more flexibility and to encourage innovations.

What this implies is that student performance in itself can be fairly and justly inspected. Access to outcome data has made it possible in the opinion of the Ohio State Legislature and the Ohio State Department of Education to discriminate among schools and districts legitimately. The quality of most standardized tests, especially for those related to measures of basic achievement skills, and the limitedness of tests, capturing only narrow ranges of schooling are overlooked.

Developing an educational improvement rationale for the 'waivers for the good; more oversight for the bad' strategy is difficult. First, reserving autonomy for high performers is not consonant with what is known about school improvement. Research on effective schooling indicates that discretion, in the form of school-site management and democratic decision-making, is integral to promoting the collegial goal agreement associated with enhanced

performance. Similarly, research on change emphasizes the importance of local ownership and leadership. School-level discretion is, according to research, best viewed as either a condition present in effective schools serving lower-achieving students and/or a necessary precursor to improvement in other schools, not a reward for already high-achieving schools.

When significant consequences are attached to scores, the quality of the data can be highly suspect. For example, measurement strategies can become highly reactive, depending on the stakes attached to the numbers. Even if better measures were available, the trend toward sanctioning low performance with more oversight can be problematic. A fundamental issue is the relationship between compliance — and less or more stringent insistence on compliance — and performance. The extent to which compliance and performance are related obviously depends on factors such as the educational soundness of the scores and regulations to which compliance is required and the suitability of those rules to local needs. Neither can be taken for granted. Compliance-related activities, such as more oversight, may not result in educational improvement and are clearly of dubious value in the case of compliant but low-performing districts. Furthermore, by offering to exempt high-performing districts from regulation, state policy-makers may be sending a different message to other districts about the benefits of compliance.

The Educational Management Information System that any district is to develop for itself (with technical assistance from the State), is being allocated one dollar for every pupil!

B. Impact of Reform Bill on Ohio

But what is happening in Cleveland and the other 611 districts in response to Cleveland reform bill is far more serious than the shortage of the dollars.

Curriculum Alignment

There is a curriculum revolution in Ohio and it is occurring quietly with little public debate. And it goes against the public's view of educational governance. It is fair to say that most of the Ohio's 612 school districts had realigned or in the process of realigning their curriculum to match the State's specified learning outcomes developed for the ninth and twelfth grade proficiency tests.

Curriculum alignment refers to the congruence of all the elements of a school curriculum including the curriculum goals, the instructional program (what is taught and the materials used) with tests objectives. Curriculum alignment represents the matching of intentions, procedure, and outcomes. Where are we going? How will we get there? And how will we know?

Ohio test scores generated by the State mandates has begun to function as one of the most powerful controls on the character of Ohio education practice. In Cleveland, we became too literal about the alignment issue. Too often the Cleveland teachers and supervisors tell me, "the test doesn't measure what we teach," or "the test asks students for information or to do things we haven't taught," or "should we teach to the test?" Should teachers teach to the tests? Some of our staff contend that unless a test can be studied for, it cannot serve as an incentive for harder work by staff and students.

It is difficult to disagree with these arguments. The issues here are more matters of the degree of variable curricular focus, the variability of that impact for different student populations, and the manner in which such curricular decisions should be made. If the emphasis on passing the test leads to reallocations of time to basic skills instruction and remediation of such a magnitude that other important subjects such as science, social studies, art, and music lose their place in the curriculum, then there is clearly a problem.

State Control vs. Local Control

The impact of Ohio's reform bill is not felt yet. It will come soon. Right now, its impact lies in the dollars required to implement most of SB #140. The Achievement/Ability tests is being implemented without any additional funding from the State. Districts are expected to bear the cost of testing scoring, and manpower. And, although the Ninth Grade Proficiency Tests are developed by the State and scored by the State, it still requires personnel to mann the security of tests, the delivery of tests to over 20 school buildings, etc.

These tests are forcing decisions about district curriculum and state policy-makers perceive the tests as tools to improve curriculum and instruction. They provide a cheap way of driving the system and they move the locus of power from local authorities to the state bureaucracies. The agency that controls the test controls the curriculum through the sanctions associated with denial of diplomas and public release of the scores. The public does not understand this issue as evidenced in their simultaneous support for a national high school graduation test and for local control of schools in the 1989 Gallup Poll. The drift of the current State policy for greater centralization of control runs counter to the call for diversity, decentralization and school-based management.

In Ohio, there is a very strong likelihood of state officials assuming more responsibility for schools, feeling more responsible and acting to solve school problems and, if necessary, making curricular policy directly. The tests weaken local control over education, creating a vacuum in which the state must assume greater responsibility and must act.

So instead of the curriculum shaping the tests, the tests are driving curricular reform. The issue is not whether the curriculum of the public schools should be reformed, but who should make these determinations. Should there be a core curriculum? These and related issues are too important to be left to the state. The curriculum should drive the tests, not vice versa. Tests should not set the standards but should reflect the standards built into the curriculum. The standards should be based on notions of what is needed for success in life and should be tempered by a sense of fairness and realism. They should be high enough to be motivating, but should be attainable by all students of normal ability who are willing to work. And they must reflect content that can be taught and learned.

Impact on Teaching

The Ninth Grade Proficiency tests, barely in its first year of implementation, have begun to exert influence beyond curriculum — it has effected student placement and resource allocations. Cleveland has put some emphasis on 'tutoring' of students after school hours by teachers, paid their regular rate of $16.00 per hour, so ninth graders can pass the tests. Cleveland has also designated a class period for all ninth graders for "intervention", and is an integral part of the summer school for the 90% of Cleveland ninth graders that failed one or more of the proficiency tests. Several of the teachers I talked to, are concerned that the narrow content focus of the tests had reduced the incentives for innovation. There appears

to be reduction of time and money to teaching content not covered by the tests. Proponents of the tests say that the focus on outcomes will give teachers greater control over the means of instruction. Professional autonomy will be increased, they contend. The opposite appears to be the case in districts like Cleveland, serving "at-risk" youth, where test scores have become so important and we are unwilling to risk any professional autonomy.

Effects on At-Risk Students

The release of the Ohio Achievement/ Ability Test results and the Ninth Grade Proficiency Tests was of great significance for Ohio urban school districts, where a disproportionate percent of their student population come from poor and disadvantaged families. As evident in practices of Cleveland and other cities, the results has led to more remediation (or by other names). There are concerns raised that the content of such remediation will be repetitive and will have the adverse effect of reducing the students' motivation to attain the regular diploma. And an issue raised by the Cleveland NAACP on "punishing the child for the inequities of the system" remains to be addressed.

Parents, teachers and others are concerned that poor performance on these tests will lead to increases in Cleveland's drop-out rate, teethering on the 50%. It is known that the major Cleveland school drop-outs are overage as a result of academic failure and repeated non-promotion.

Clearly, there is cause to be concerned about any policy or program that would push more Ohio students out of schools in the current environment. Drop-outs from high school face an increasingly hostile labor market in which the high school diploma serves as an important screening device for employers. Even the military is not accepting volunteers who lack a diploma. Standards for admission to higher education are being raised, closing off options for student who do not succeed in high school. In the 1990s, the student who fails to attain a high school diploma faces a future full of risk.

CONCLUSION

What can be concluded from this presentation of issues, relative to Ohio's Education Reform Bill? It is clear that Ohio's reform bill is directly related to student test outcomes. There are indeed compelling reasons to raise standards, and the use of tests to measure effectiveness of the reform have a strong support. There is the other issue also that these tests will not resolve the issue of equity, because the issues are political and they involve allocation of resources and availability of opportunities. The test scores will make such inequities more visible, while they contribute to other problems, such as differences in the character and content of curriculum, the negative effects of tests on at-risk population etc. The narrowing of the curriculum must be monitored to ensure that more learning important is not sacrificed.

Ohio districts' reactions to State's waivers, rewards and sanctions remains to be seen. There are concerns about the State's ability to deliver the assistance that less capable districts may need. Even if that assistance is limited only to developing a plan for corrective actions. If school improvement is the goal for all and waivers from regulation appear to be rewards for "excellent schools" isn't there the implication that these waivers are better removed for all? There is a legitimate need to develop better indicators of school performance. There are to be the State Standards for rewarding and sanctioning districts and schools. In this instance I proposed more knowledge base that will make it possible to access the promise and viability of the State's 'excellent' and 'deficient' schools or districts.

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